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## You Gotta Crack A Few Begg To Make An Honest

Jonathan Alexander Brown

[jonathanbrownmusic@yahoo.com](mailto:jonathanbrownmusic@yahoo.com)

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You Gotta Crack a Few Beggars to Make an Honest

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by  
Jonathan Brown  
B.A. College of Charleston 2005  
M.A. New College of California 2006

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## A Dip Into The Infinite: A Preface

When I was nine, my oldest brother said he would give me twenty bucks if I promised to stay in my room. Our parents had gone out of town, and he was home from college. He was going to throw a party. Being the little brother, I obliged. As the evening went on, the noise grew louder. My Legos became less entertaining. The ruckus from downstairs swelled with handclapping, hoots, and hollers every so often. I had to satisfy my curiosity, so I snuck downstairs, peaked around the corner, and spotted my brother standing on the coffee table, waving his arms and shouting at our living room full of people. Was he preaching? Was he singing? Why? And who were those people in our house?

I only got a glimpse before I snuck back upstairs, so as not to be noticed. When I hit the top step, I heard applause erupt, but what was happening down there? <sup>1</sup> Why did it mean so much to me? Why does it still?

I'm drawn to the idea that memory is a creative process. Sure, things happen, but we frame them as stories that inform our daily lives. We make meaning by interpreting events. Some might argue convincingly that memory is not a creative process, but it's undeniably a selective one. Countless things I could have remembered from childhood evade memory, yet I chose the anecdote about my brother reciting a poem. Maybe I fell asleep while watching *Dead Poet's Society* and Robin Williams' character has seeped into my subconscious. Whatever sparked my dedication to the importance of poetry... I was hooked.

---

<sup>1</sup> I later learned my brother was reciting "She being brand" by E. E. Cummings. It became one of my favorite poems to perform and teach.

\*

\*

\*

Phillip Levine's poetry has always moved me because he shows us how the self overlaps. Consider his "You Can Have It" where a couple of strophes in particular reveal how we have many variations of the self, each vying for meaning:

Thirty years will pass before I remember  
that moment when suddenly I knew each man  
has one brother who dies when he sleeps  
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,  
  
and that together they are only one man  
sharing a heart that always labors, hands  
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps  
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

The answer is implied. Yes, brother. You are going to make it. One of you is, and we're all one. For Levine, poetry connects to the infinite while grounding itself in the now, the cadence and familiarity of everyday speech. It's really impressive how Levine uses blue-collar language to discuss the high spiritual concepts. Just as the speaker in Levine's poem learned the value of hard work from watching his brother, I learned there was essentially something mystical about the performance of poetry. Later, I became my brother. I shouted poems at people in coffee shops and music stages and, yes, even house parties.



In “Lyrical Ballads” William Wordsworth famously said, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” But to what end? Why all this reflection dedicated to strong feelings? Does poetry matter? How much does it matter? To me, yes, and to me, a lot. It means everything. I’d argue that not only the reflection, but also the sharing of that reflection, the performance of poetry mitigates existence because it helps us all feel less alone, which explains why my process as a poet is a vocal one, sort of. It’s a mix between stream of consciousness journal entries combed, over then chopped into audible phrases, then reorganized for continuity. I’m creating a mosaic out of words, then throwing every piece into the air to see how it sounds while I scribble phrases in foot-tall letters on a giant chalkboard on the wall of my living room. Then I write it all down on paper. I’ve found the medium changes the message. If you want short, tight lines, use a tiny sheet of paper. It sounds oversimplified, but it’s true. I send my work through at least three different media before I count something as a draft.

I talk to myself as I write. I want the syntax to be as natural as a conversation. I quietly resist the movement in academia to be sparse with language. Economy of language seems like an oxymoron. Writing is not accounting. As an artist, I want to make something beautiful. Not something flawless. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t shun revision. I love to revise until the final looks nothing like the original. But I do resist a finished product that comes across as mechanical and airtight.

In spoken word, you can let filler words stand. Filler words, often used to build rhythm and keep time, don't really work on the page because there is no metronome. The eye is the time. Or, to illustrate my point, the previous idea will now be conveyed as if it were included in a page poem.

Page poetry.  
No metronome.  
Eye is time.

The writer who imagines the final manifestation of this thought belonging on the page as a poem might stare at it and think, *How can I simplify? The "is" is implied. There has to be a way to make the last line tighter, more economical. Furthermore, the term "page poetry" is still clunky. I need a specific term that moves closer to the intended meaning. Let's try something more acute.*

Prosody scanned.  
No metronome.  
Eye, time.

Now if a spoken word poet approached the same idea, the strophe might be written as follows:

Not to say that when you rock a stage  
attention to each piece of speech  
isn't important towards or away  
from the tortured way we receive meaning,

Individual syllables keep  
building the sequence  
until the speaker peaks and overheats  
and the listener needs a purse full of sleep-  
ing pills to cope with the verse.

But even still, an abundance of utterances  
can muck up the love we have for words.

Here, rhyme and rhythm are given priority over, and at the expense of, conciseness. This version is definitely too wordy, but within that verbosity lies a boisterous attempt to have fun with language.

So which version is better? Well, they're both bad and not exactly because one is tighter and the other rhymes more. They're both bad because there's no heart behind the style. There's no insight or passion. In my manuscript, I've worked hard to strike a balance between these two theories. I aim to be succinct without losing verbal bounce, but more importantly, I'm aiming for and coming from the heart.

I certainly don't subscribe to the idea that all art is biographical. Art, however, can be a type of alchemy. We turn metal into (we hope) gold. Or maybe a more apt metaphor would be a prism. Events shine through our consciousness, and we split different meanings in every direction. We can then choose which beam of light means the most to us. Each streak of light is a decision, an image, a poetic device, or a narrative to follow.

The titles of the sections in this manuscript are lifted from Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey. I'm using Campbell's language here to frame the different sections because the collection itself aims to come full circle. I want the reader to leave the known world, go into the darkness, struggle, and return enlightened. Lofty... I know, but how we contextualize ourselves along the concept of the hero's journey is what gives the ups and downs of life meaning.

In many ways, our identities are encapsulated within the stories we tell. I am the kid who promised to stay in his bedroom. I am my brother screaming at his

drunken friends. I am my parents who were out of town. I am the coffee table. Each of these pieces is a part of the story, and it's my story.

For me, poetry has always been a way of making sense of the world. It's a means of zooming in on a memory and then finding perspective in a way that mitigates our existence. My poems are answers to implied questions. "The Call to Adventure" addresses the question of what is it like to grow up. "The Belly of the Whale" means to answer how it feels to fall in and out of love. "Atonement" examines what it means to "earn a living." "The Return" means to explore the question of to what degree it's possible to know god.

"The Call to Adventure" is where the journey starts. All of the poems in this section have to do with some variation of childhood. "Adult Swim" tries to dig into my memory of what's it like to be a chubby kid. As tough as it is to be different, that difference may help define us. Or not. A boy can hold onto his separateness or realize we're all shaped a little weird. "Adult Swim" ends on the lines, "Or just get my towel and spend the afternoon/ pretending I'm older than ten." I mean to suggest here is it's time to move on; it's time to finally grow up, and it's time to get started with this manuscript.

Furthermore, "The Belly of the Whale" concerns relationships, as well as love and intimacy. Here, often, I'm exploring how opposites help create meaning. In other words, we may know something by what it is not. We know it's night by the absence of light. We know it's hot by the absence of cold. We know we're inspired, by the absence of doubt. We know love by... well, this concept may be harder to define

simply, but that's the point – to attempt to get closer to an understanding of what love is.

Yusef Komanyakaa's poem, "Safe Subjects" helps illustrate my point. It starts, "How can love heal/ the mouth shut this way?" I'm moved by the concept of silence as a means of protection. Lovers grow apart oftentimes out of concern for the other. We don't say what's on our minds because we don't want to hurt our lover's feelings. Noble but cowardly. There's a line in "The Architect of Heartache" that bounces off my idea of opposites and also reflects Komanyakaa's sentiments. If "It took the death of something beautiful/ to create a sense of urgency." is true, (and I mean in Keats' "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" type of way) it's opposite is also true, if not more. It takes the death of a sense of urgency to create something beautiful.

The collection's third section, "Atonement" has to do with teaching. I call it that because I was never a particularly "good" student, and so teaching high school for eight years was my attempt to atone or make amends. Disruptive would be one way I could describe my young self; inquisitive would be another. I could call myself a bully, or I could say I exhibited leadership qualities at an early age. If I'm honest, though, I taught because I wanted to make it right. But what is it? It's the systematic inequalities that exist in public schools. And, it's me. The title of "When the teacher is ready, the student won't appear" inverts the famous phrase from Bhudda, that poem inhabits the inescapable inadequacy that every teacher feels at some point. When you make one hundred decisions a minute, you're bound to make some bad ones. Keeping with the theme of opposites, you're also destined to make some amazing decisions, some so good you just might reach atonement.

Finally, “The Return” is a dip into the infinite. I’m fascinated by god and the idea of god. There’s a line in the poem “Perfect Just The Way You Are” where prayers are personified. They say “If faith without works/ is dead, how do we as prayers find work?” In this section of the manuscript I am most concerned with how we find ways to navigate through the higher stages of consciousness. How do we, through poetics, find the alchemy it takes to make such a transformation possible? How do we, like Prometheus, ascend into heaven, steal the fire, and return to tell the tale?

## I. The Call to Adventure

## At the Statue of Saint Jude

### I.

I'm nothing more than a little  
kid sitting on the steps  
of Christopher Columbus Cathedral.

I've lost my shoes. The only thing  
I wish I had was bread  
for these pigeons as they crisscross  
this patron saint of lost causes.

I'm hoping a magic eight ball  
isn't as hard to swallow  
as the pride I take in my fun  
house memory.

### II.

Darling, you make an hourglass out of me.  
All the cars outside my house are parked crooked  
with their doors wide open.

It's clear whoever comes near my life  
gets out as fast as she can.  
If you leave this year, I'm going with you.

There's a train ticket with our names on it  
if all the old habits don't outlast us.  
If the magic eight ball takes all day,  
we'll have to shake ourselves awake.

Let's kiss our doorbells goodbye! Give the cat away!  
This is the year of no mistakes.



## Adult Swim

The concept of closure has become so foreign to me  
I don't even return books to the library anymore.  
When the late fees tire of being themselves  
and become mere bills, I take that as a metaphor  
for passing the point of no return.

It's funny how some memories  
sink and others can float.  
Once when I was ten  
at the neighborhood pool  
during the adult swim  
I got a hankering  
for a Cherry Coke so  
I waddled over  
to the vending machine  
and while I fed it  
my fifty cents a boy in line behind me  
tapped my shoulder to ask  
why I have boobs.

The thought of swimming still  
makes me unhappy though most days  
I forget why.

So yesterday when my friend asked me  
to go to the pool, up until then, I had forgotten  
where my copy of *Memoir of a Hawk* was,  
but I began to wonder if I needed to find James Tate  
and return him to the library  
or just grab my towel and spend the afternoon  
pretending I'm older than ten.

## Fat Camp or Military School?

Your mother and I have decided to put you up for adoption. The paperwork isn't final, but we are confident we're making the right decision. It's high time you at least try to pry yourself off that couch. We didn't raise you to be such a wet towel. Put some pants on. Make something of yourself besides an embarrassment in front of the neighbors. Because if the neighbors tell the other neighbors, we'll never be able to show our faces at Applebee's again. Is that what you want? Look, we just want you to be happy. *Look at me when I'm talking to you!*

## And How Does That Make You Feel?

Your therapist will tell you not to hate your parents.  
Instead, he will tell you to shave your head,  
then give him twenty. You'll think he's bluffing,  
until *click*, the buzz of the electric razor.

Poetry and therapists have only  
one thing in common: submission.

You'll tell him your most  
embarrassing moments. He'll cuddle  
and coo you. He'll assure you everybody's  
probably a little gay. Circle jerking  
is the Christopher Columbus  
of the prepubescent hetero.

You're discovering who you are and listen  
if his hot-third-cousin  
whom he has not seen since his grandma died  
promised to have that abortion,  
he'd probably run up in it raw too.  
We don't ask for these thoughts.  
We just have them.

You'll tell him how bright you burn,  
how you're not sure suicide isn't  
the better option. He'll scratch his chin.  
You'll tell him you're a sleepwalker.  
You'll tell him there's no real way  
either of you can tell  
if you're actually awake right now.

You'll see he's bored with his wife,  
his children, his life, and you'll say so.  
He'll deny it. He'll tell you to go home.  
You'll tell him this exact moment  
is a poem. He'll click his pen  
and circle something on his clipboard,  
then clear his throat and pretend  
to be disinterested, but you,  
after those push-ups,  
will have the confidence of a bee sting.

## Recess Recessed

Always at the edge  
of the sandbox. Never  
in the middle. Slumped over  
with a bucket and shovel. Let's pretend  
he enjoys riding the swings all by himself.  
Close his eyes and he'll pretend he's flying.  
He's fine without our help.

Pretend you're the attendant  
at the exit of the parking deck.  
Validate him already.

Or don't. Give him tough love.  
Say you won't. Say you've had enough of

this snot-nosed-boy with the toy piano.  
You've got no obligation to hold his hand through  
another annoying monologue  
about destroying his mom, his dog,  
and everybody else who has had the gall  
to love him. This tantrum is a sham,  
a plot, an answer to a question  
no one sought.

Meandyouville, Population 2

I was born in the bed of a pick up truck  
drunk driving up the buckle of the bible belt.  
At every tire-melting-swerve, it felt as if

each red light burned through was a death-  
defying ant under a magnifying glass in the hands  
of a slobbering god. By my ninth birthday I learned

to ride a white lie like a bike.  
My hopes are still as high as we got  
that night we jumped the chain-link fence

to plant a granny smith apple tree  
on our alma mater's fifty yard line.  
We plucked up wet blades of grass

in the end zone and made birdcalls  
with our palms held in prayer.  
I swore we were eleven again, soaked in sunlight,

skipping rocks across the top of Lake Hartwell.  
Sorry I never wrote you back. Sometimes I still  
wait for the clouds to get out of the way

so I can see the same full moon you see tonight.  
I guess I wanted us to remember us before the world  
so reluctantly proved we are not invincible.

Part of me will always ride my bike  
down the dirt road of my adolescence, to smoke  
cigarettes in the parking lot of the Methodist church

on a Friday night. My heartbeat feels like footsteps  
on the other side of my chest. Not sure where  
I'm walking, but I know it feels good to be outside.

## You Must Be This Tall To Ride

Who knows what  
the thrill ride, Peter Pan's Flight,  
was thinking at Disney World in 2011  
when it fractured both legs  
and one arm of that old woman.

You gotta crack a few eggs to make an honest,  
especially, when the track before you never changes,  
and you get that nagging itch  
you're meant for something better than strangers  
pretending they love you  
depending how the weather changes.

Everything fun is designed to kill you  
but who doesn't want the sweet release  
from redundancy? Purple Slurpees  
could have the same plan. You think  
that giant pretzel or sweaty hot dog  
has your best interest in mind?  
Diabetes will take with it a couple of toes,  
the ability to see, or a whole leg if you let it.

How else would you put your foot down?  
Especially if you had no foot to put?

## II. The Belly of the Whale

## The Night You Told Me To Stop Sending You Poems

The night you told me to  
stop sending you poems  
I turned blue with green  
beneath the lightning.

I desperately wanted  
to break even.  
I read Larry Levis  
hoping he would save me.

I shattered a wine glass  
on my kitchen floor,  
then tried to glue it  
together again

with peanut butter.  
I did the same  
with a dozen eggs.  
All the clocks stopped.

I ripped a picture of you  
in two. The one I took  
at an RJD2 concert.  
It wasn't the first time

I've run out of Band-Aids  
and used electrical tape.  
I put my ear to my cat  
to figure out how purring works.



## If Bukowski Gave Dating Advice

*a woman must be nursed into subsistence  
by love where a man can  
become stronger by being hated.*  
Charles Bukowski

There's a minimum level of showmanship required  
when informing the woman you won't fuck her.

Tell her it's the herpes acting up again  
even if it's not. Let her know it's not her

fault, and so on and so forth. Let her down easy.  
Assure her she's pretty. Blame it on the placement

of the stars. Don't make her suffer. Say,  
it's the way things are, just the way

things had been, before she arrived.  
Or, you can take the heavy-handed approach:

Tell her you're not a whore, and you're insulted  
she would insinuate anything of the sort.

Tell her she's barking up the wrong penis,  
and no matter how much she shakes a peach tree,

ain't no bananas falling out.  
Tell her you've taken a vow of celibacy.

Or use the old it's-not-you-it's-me trope.  
See how far that gets you.

## Variations on the Theme of Loud

The fear of singing the wrong song  
or the right song the wrong way belongs  
near the thoughts, *Why not?* And, *Who's got next?*

The right questions can shock you  
back into your body, and a soul  
without a body can often be

a messy idea  
about to be forgotten. See,  
function needs the form to exist.

Paint becomes a painting only on canvas  
and only with trusting hands  
committed to becoming a meaning

beyond themselves. Thus the phrase,  
*Why are you so stingy with yourself?*  
actually sounds the same as

*I want you to be happy and wish you the best*  
to the listener who hasn't figured out  
the difference.

A blind dog beaten can't clearly distinguish  
between a hand reaching out to slap  
and one that wants to play.

Wind and rain  
see an enemy and friend  
exactly the same.

## For Pizza

Maybe instead of saying I'll love you forever  
you could say I'll love you for pizza.

I will love you even through  
the mushrooms. I hate mushrooms  
and compromise, but for you

I will swallow them both  
until I am full, about three slices,  
one pitcher of High Life,  
and one awful argument.

## I Tell You What

You're as juicy as a creole tomato that had a watermelon  
for a momma. You said you were thirty-three  
but you don't look a day over thirsty. See  
that burgundy dress was made for slithering out of.

You're so pretty over there I want to lie to you,  
tell you I'm a pilot or a college professor  
with not great credit, but good credit.  
Impressed yet?  
I can install solar panels with one hand.  
My middle name is God-Damn-It.  
I was raised by frogs.  
See watch. I can hold my breath  
for thirty seconds. My nephew says  
I'm the tallest man on the planet.

## A Zombie's Posts on OKcupid

1.

I'd want to take it slow. Snuggle on the couch and watch snuff films,  
then see where things go. Who knows?

2.

Seeking someone who is willing to understand me for me.  
Not just exoticize my connection to evil  
or treat me like I don't have a heart just because  
my blood has congealed. I'm tired of trying to fix people.

3.

The first thing people notice about me is my jaundiced eyes.

4.

If this sounds like something you might be interested in,  
inbox me a photo and I will promise to haunt you in your sleep.

5.

I don't like long walks on the beach  
because seagulls tend to eat my decomposing flesh.

6.

FML. It's complicated. LOL.

7.

I'm just getting over a bad break up.  
Long story but the short version:  
my fiancé of 400 years cheated on me.  
I wanted to kill but because I'm a zombie,  
the desire to kill only made my love for her  
stronger. She didn't understand why  
I couldn't see her infidelity as a cry for help  
or a dove of peace to eat.

8.

Disclaimer alert: my breath wilts sunflowers.  
The good news? If you have a pest problem,  
I could breathe on your roaches and termites and poof!  
Sorry, but I don't know what to do about the maggots  
eating their way out of my flesh, rotting. I've tried everything:  
raid, lice shampoo, fire.

9.

But hey, everybody has baggage.

Let's check ours at the pearly gates  
and fly away for never.

10.

Serious replies only.

## Nice To Meet You

It's taken me forever to say  
I don't believe we met yesterday  
but it seems that way, in fact,  
whenever we reintroduce ourselves  
after coming together-

*Hey, you. Hey, darlin.*  
*How are you? Amazing.*  
*Yeah, you are.*

--As if we haven't seen each other  
for weeks, while our insides  
flutter up against our outsides, begging  
to shout through our skin as though our skin  
is a candy wrapper, barely holding us in

from melting through the mouth of the bed  
and into the bamboo bones of the bed frame,  
away and into a new life where we already met,

where our perceptions are no longer our own,  
where hours pass by like lines on a highway,  
where we're not afraid to get lost,  
proud to not want  
to wander back home.

## Offensive Defense Mechanism

Thank you for being such a porcupine.  
I learned so much:  
when to shut up, and not ask for shit,  
when to buck up, believe in the fantastic,  
what not to put up with,  
how not to get stuck,  
when to forgive,  
and when to give up.

I wish I could say I'm over you,  
but I think I'm just farther away.  
Too hard to say. For a while there I definitely stood  
next to you or behind you. Select the prickliest  
prepositional phrase that best fits  
the few times we didn't argue.

What do you say? I'll bring  
my desperate; you bring your plan B.  
I'll show my teeth; you'll wonder  
what's gotten into me.

We wobble indiscreetly  
between awkward intimacy  
and the plot turning  
from a not-worth-it defeat  
to the not-so-great  
afterthought, the mirage of victory,  
between fuck you and fuck me.



## Unreliable Narrator

I don't know about you, but I'm currently taken  
advantage of by the continental breakfast. So far  
I've had a smattering of raisin bran,  
a thimble full of apple juice, two cups  
of Pepto-Bismol-pink yogurt, three  
sausage patties, a Belgium-waffle,  
and four cups of coffee. But it's not enough.  
It's never enough.

I thought people ate their feelings in sequential order,  
but instead of lowering the calories count  
on this yogurt, they just shrank the container.

My ex's doppelganger  
just surfaced from within a Christmas tree.  
It's past Easter; she's popping out like a pimple,  
or a dick in a box, or a zit on a dick in a box,  
or an unwrapped Pop Tart  
self-conscious about his own frosting.  
I don't kiss and tell but I don't care if you do.  
Yes. I know my t-shirt is inside out. I wore it yesterday.  
I swear you're looking at me  
as if you want to ride me like I'm a Zonkey.  
Or is it called a Deebra?

I know I could make better choices but fuck it.  
Let's skip the sheets of linen and make it  
a night to forget. Let's run through  
the streets singing the chorus of *Tiny Dancer*  
while looking for the ghost of Jeffrey Dahmer.  
I'll bet you think about last night and feel strange  
two years ago because I look at this morning  
with a pirate smile and you would too,  
were it not for the fact that we have never met.  
None of this is true, but  
it's not the opposite either.  
Not yet.

## The Architect of Heartache

stays up late at his drafting table  
manufacturing sketch after sketch of regret.  
It took a straight edge, a bone stencil,  
and a year and half to fashion pastels  
from the powder of Monarch's wings.  
It took the death of something beautiful  
to create a sense of urgency.  
But it only takes one word to get free  
so he made that word, *love*,  
as if it were a thing.

He named his buildings after lovers  
who could never love him as hard  
as concrete pilings or steel girders do.  
His phone never rang as it never rang before.  
Patricia would tell you herself, "I'm a brick house."  
Shannon, a matchstick mansion.  
Elizabeth was marble monument to forgiveness.  
His life's work was a good lie, the kind  
that can withstand the fire  
of being retold again and again. A boulder  
rolled across the sky. Slowly,

he learned people  
don't endure as his work does.  
*The world rushed in a circle  
and turned on its axis  
and time was busy  
burning the years  
and the people away.*

## Lover Go Colorstay

I wish I was your lipstick. I want you  
to put me on like that. I want you  
to leave me on cigarettes.  
I want you to take me out  
in bathrooms at swanky hotels.  
and press me to your lips  
then drop me in your purse  
like nothing happened and pretend.  
I want you to feel taller  
how I made you. Wherever you walk  
eyes follow. I want you to hold me  
like you own me. I want you  
to toss me aside when  
I am used up.

### III... Atonement

## When The Teacher Is Ready, The Student Won't Appear

### 1. False Start

It breaks my heart in a thousand brittle places  
to watch educators lower their fickle expectations.  
I don't want to paint all teachers in a negative light.  
I taught for eight years. I gave it my life.

One of the most awkward moments teaching  
is when you give a test and half  
the class finishes, while the other half  
tries to concentrate but there are five  
minutes left before the lunch bell rings.

It's basically nap time then  
for the ones who didn't sleep last night  
And it's... I don't know how to act right  
for the ones who can't sit still. That's fine.

Overheard in the teachers lounge last week...  
*"He was as cute as a puppy dog,  
but you can't teach a puppy dog to read."*

### 2. The Grades We Earn

Who am I to cast the first  
stoned student an F?

What have I taught  
if the kid I caught  
cheating on the final  
is already failing  
and I fail him again?

When he drops out,  
if he goes to jail,  
we both get to say,  
I told you so.

But who failed whom?

Sometimes I get a handful  
of pupils amped-up

to be made examples  
of and truthfully  
I'm in a mood  
to prove myself  
the alpha above  
the bully,

but then  
I lose my temper  
and I say,

*Nobody, but you,  
believes your excuses,  
nobody. If you  
really hate school,  
why not try  
to pass this class  
before you have  
to repeat  
tenth grade again.*

But as soon  
as those words  
accidentally slip  
I can immediately  
see the damage they did.

So I'm sorry, kid.  
Here's your grade,  
a cinderblock  
tied to the ankle of your GPA.

Maybe next semester  
we'll both do better.

We receive the grades we earn.  
So here: The F we both deserve.

Awkward Teacher Moment Poem #71

In light of my students being mandated  
to take the ACT in two weeks with my job security  
hinging on the results

*I told them*

Today instead of the usual fun we have,  
we have to work on test prep.

*They got sad.*

So I said one day your best friend will lie to your face  
and it will be worse than this.

*Nothing.*

So I said one day the person who has defined what love means  
for you will look you dead in the eyes and tell you he  
or she doesn't love you anymore and it will be worse than this.

*A few smiles.*

So I said one day one of your parents will definitely die  
and that day will be much worse than today at which point  
the girl whose dad had just died

*started to cry.*

Fight Dirty

*Poems are bullshit unless they are...*  
Amiri Baraka

Poems are bullshit if they have more math  
than song, if they are to be solved  
not sung. They don't mean a thing,  
not a damn thang, if they don't bang in the trunk.

Poems afraid to get off the page have shit to say  
about the way poems are meant to be spit.

Poems commanding a line for CD sales  
instead of a line on a CV fail  
in measuring up because the measuring stick  
is stuck up in a fucking writing workshop in Iowa

where sound poetry has nothing to do with sound  
and line breaks and break beats act like ex-lovers  
right after awkward sex in the coat closet  
at their high school reunion.

Donald Hall might think your whole life led you here  
but we both know you woke up regretful,  
set to pull a Norton off the shelf  
to wed another dead sonnet to your consciousness.

But we, the people, want poems who won't apologize  
for how wild they are. We want poems to say  
all the wrong things right. We want poems  
who swing for the neck and know how to connect.



## Taking the ACT on the Chin

Fill in the bubble that indicates your value as a human being.  
Sleeping will not be tolerated. Neither will swallowing.  
Spit out all food immediately.

All unverified noises such as  
sneezing or breathing will be considered  
a testing violation. Even minor  
infractions, such as outward expressions  
of extreme depression will be captured  
on videotape and sent to The State  
Department for analysis. Mark a response  
for each question even if you are uncertain about the answer.

Lay your pencil down immediately when time  
is called at the end of each test. Do not  
fold or tear the pages of your test booklet.

You may not for any reason fill in or alter  
ovals for a test after time is called.  
To do so will disqualify you.

In twenty-four minutes  
one of these four doors will open. After  
our representative from The State Department  
emerges to rip out your heart  
he or she will place it in this secure,  
climate-controlled cooler for transport.

You will be notified via subpoena  
as soon as we have made a decision  
regarding your heart's whereabouts.  
The nurse will be with you in a moment to draw blood.  
Are you allergic to any medications?

If you are caught daydreaming during the test,  
your results will be subject to review  
due to impulsive thought-swapping.  
Calls may be recorded.

Once we've started, a facsimile of your score  
will be sketched by a composite artist unless  
you feel insulted, in which case, your dispute

will be settled by a groupthink consensus  
in order to determine which target market  
best suits your life path and worldview.

Your feelings towards this test and others like it  
are property of ETS and its parent company.

You may begin.

## I Don't Know, the Title Could Use Some Work

Right when the poem starts, the language is very muscular,  
very construction worker. It makes me  
want to wear a hard hat, spit and swing  
a pick ax or grab my nuts and direct traffic.

Right off the bat, clearly there is  
a journey in the heart of this poem  
not only in the heart, but in the liver  
and pancreas too. I have a strong feeling  
the journey wants to trickle  
into other body parts as well.

But the poem really loses me in the third stanza.  
I don't know, maybe I'm just being picky and anal  
but the line, "Gentrification is the new whitey diaspora"  
really confuses me, although I like the way  
it looks on the page. The spacing invokes textures of  
colonizer flesh and overpriced apartments.

Your language is so fluid and flowing.  
Maybe in revision you could cut out  
a picture of a waterfall  
and glue it on top of this poem.

I never knew Styrofoam could be spiritual until  
your metaphor about never decomposing  
gave me a new perspective on eternal life.

For me, the thread feels the strongest  
when the quilt is sewn. I love quilts. My grandma  
had a tree farm in Southern Georgia. She had many cats.  
Cats roamed her farm like teeth in a mouth.

For me, the previous stanza really broke  
the dream. I don't see how it fit,

although I like how the poem talks to itself  
as though it's on a cell phone with an earpiece,  
answering a question only it can hear.

Towards the end of the poem  
the sensuality is so post-modernly pastoral.  
I can practically smell its rotten milk

in the lopsided udders  
of the plastic mad cow.

I could almost touch  
the cactus in the clouds.

And that word *flippant*, I love that word.  
Imagine little red and black ants  
doing back flips.

I think this poem could get published-  
I really do- if you gave the editor  
a hand job.

## The Black Angel

I have a black angel                      fish I've been trying to figure out                      how to discipline.  
She nips at the other fishes' fins.                      Seems to be nothing                      I can do about it.

I could starve her                      but then I'd harm the                      other fish.  
Isn't that always the way?                      You paying for someone                      else's sins?

As if morality                      had a balance                      or swimming  
in your own piss                      wasn't                      enough already?

You know that part                      in your favorite song                      where everything crescendos  
and you head bang                      in your kitchen                      when no one else is around?

Maybe that part                      sticks in the black angel's head and                      she only wants  
to be alone.                      Or maybe the                      other fish don't know

they're in a mosh pit.                      No matter.                      It's all forgotten  
as soon as I walk away.                      I'm no                      fish boss.

Sure, I have to change                      the water.                      Sure, I have to feed them,  
watch them,                      and ask them questions.                      I can't

blame them                      for not answering.                      They can't talk  
yet, but                      I'm teaching them to read                      by stacking Time

magazines against the back                      of the glass.                      I watch and wait  
for the sake of the others. Hopefully, reading will teach them                      love or patience.

#### IV. The Return

*Tat Tvam Asi = Thou Art That*

I.

Seeing the god light  
squeaking through the grey  
clouds after the rain shower

reminds me how  
when you die  
you lose your body  
but keep your soul,  
and your soul is older  
than all the oak trees,  
but only the acorns know  
how the elegy goes.

Last night is a past life.  
Thou art that.  
You used to be  
a blade of grass  
but then a cow  
moseyed in  
and grazed on you  
and later  
in the maze of truth  
you turned around  
and ate a steak.

You can count how many  
seeds make up an apple.  
But can you count the apples  
in an apple seed?

II.

We beg the infinite  
to be consistent  
as if time were listening.

We are made of god,  
god light, light, water  
and time; but time is man

and manmade. Seasons  
don't chase each other  
because nature doesn't  
get impatient. But we do.

Is it C'est La Vie or Déjà vu  
or neither or some  
variation of the two  
when whatever we focus on expands?

You go places.  
Places disappear.  
You've been the plane  
and the tarmac.  
You've been the bus boy,  
the bell hop, and the bar back.  
You've been the market crash  
and the Arby's bag. You've been  
apart yet been a part of all that.

You've been thirty and twelve  
and seventy years old.  
You've been told and you've told  
and you've been told again.  
You've dictated and you've been awaiting  
instructions from something greater  
than yourself but somehow  
you still feel separate  
as if there was such no such thing  
as everybody else.



## Call Waiting (A Love Poem)

I don't believe Charlton Heston is looking down  
launching lightning bolts  
from up there in his chariot.            Nevertheless, yesterday

a woman, waiting in line at a grocery store  
in Houma, was struck by lightning. Google

it. The inexplicable has an origin. Maybe            fire ants  
bite just because            that's how they show love.

Every box of macaroni and cheese in my cupboard is stoic,  
... like, *Go ahead! Kill me!* Monsanto sounds

like the name of a horse. I love Jell-O more  
than I'm willing to admit, which is strange

because I don't know how Jell-O feels about me  
besides jiggly. If a nail magically

turns to goo when submerged in Coca-Cola,  
and if Adele can set fire to the rain,  
I can stick this cold coffee in the microwave  
while I wait for you to ring.

## Perfect Just The Way You Are

*Shankara wanted to persuade people that the forms in which they had clothed God were purely for their own devotional upliftment: They were not literal realities.*

Swami Kriyananda

I worry that my prayers  
play telephone on their way out  
from my whispers  
as if they had to pause  
at the top of my throat to ask directions.

*Do we have to throw pants on  
before we leave the house?  
Which way to fruition? How do we, as prayers,  
not fade in the distance? If faith without works  
is dead, how can we find work?*

Maybe each prayer is unique and hardened  
by its own eclectic proclivities. Some feel  
unseen and unheard, others  
as avid avatars, ardent about their ability  
to adapt willingly towards any need.  
All weather prayers,  
you might say.

There are those who know  
what to do with the clay  
and those who know  
how to create their own kiln.

To beg sounds more credible  
when dressed to kill, as if there were  
a more fitting occasion like a dressing room  
maybe at Macy's where a prayer could try  
on a few pairs of jeans and assess how they move  
in the mirror. *See there? You see that?*

Even imaginary prayers looking for  
imaginary pants in imaginary department stores  
can't relax anymore. Four parts or more  
removed but some prayers still  
feel stupid and fat.

## Hello From The Other Side

William Butler Yeats appeared to Larry Levis in a dream and said,  
“Passion is the only thing that matters in poetry,  
and as a matter of fact, it’s the only thing  
that matters in life,” or at least, that’s how Levis put it.  
That’s as romantic as two hobos in the snow  
spooning under a park bench to stay warm.

I want famous poets to visit me in my dreams  
but all I can get is Axl Rose  
and not even the cool version of him  
wearing the hell out of his black leather pants  
and playing piano in the video  
for “November Rain.” Oh no.  
I don’t get the rock icon chilling with Slash.  
I don’t get the paid spokesmen for a ménage a trois  
dispensing advice on how to deal with groupies.

Instead, I get the 2014 version,  
his face bursting with plastic surgery  
as he talks about dressing up  
as an ear of corn  
for Halloween. What is that  
even supposed to mean?

## Out Through The In Door

If I were                    to have an    out-  
of-body experience,            I'd

want to exit  
through my bellybutton.            You know,

for consistency's sake.            It would,  
I feel, increase my chances  
                                 of finding my way  
back home.

If I left  
                                 this world  
   the way  
   I found it

and I could    fit a pen  
and a little notepad, my hands  
and an eyeball,  
                                 and an ear  
   or three of each  
   through my bellybutton,

I could take notes                    out there  
report back  
on what I hear  
                                 from the other side  
of the great divide.

The only way                    through a door  
                                 is out of it. So maybe,            too,  
                                 the only way  
out of the self                    is through it.

What if the only way to                    surpass  
                                 the body  
   is to be still  
   within it?

## Permanently In Medias Res

Lately I wake up outside  
my body hovering  
    roughly six feet  
above my bed, but sometimes

    I'm under the bed.  
One time I got stuck in the trunk of my car. Couldn't  
escape that one until I woke up.  
    Watching my self sleep  
from the perspective  
    of the ceiling fan

really used to creep me out  
and still does,  
especially when I see  
    the hand  
reaching towards  
my face but can't  
    tell whose hand  
or whose face.

    If you withdraw  
from the skin  
and everything in it,  
will the residue  
of time  
    be left  
behind?

    A minute-sized-dent?  
    Perhaps an hour  
scattered throughout the suitcases  
    cartooned in place  
for the sake of verisimilitude.  
    After all, we're traveling, right?

    When in a disembodied point of view  
    do you take everything with you?

No matter. Now I have to put myself together  
    for the rest  
of the day.     However,  
there's no

way I can do that if a third of my better faculties blur  
or refuse  
to mingle between the woke and the dream state.

I need to find my kneecaps,  
and as soon as I do,  
I'm headed to the coffee maker.  
Is there anything you  
need me to bring back?

Is nothing all  
or nothing?

Three Possible Homophonic Responses to the Note I Found on the Counter Which Reads as Follows:

*Jonathan,*  
*I had lots of extra thyme, so I brought some over for you. It's wrapped in*  
*a paper towel in a Ziploc bag in the back of the fridge. Enjoy!*  
*Sean*

Dear Sean,

I remember you telling me you were lengthening your day  
thirty minutes by listening to Books-on-Tape while taking the train.  
Thanks so much for sharing your extra time with me.  
I used this time to scramble eggs  
with goat cheese and fresh basil rather  
than shovel my usual bowl of Cheerios  
down my throat while tying my shoes.  
Thanks again. You're the best.

Dear Sean,

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful. It's just,  
I'm suspicious of anything leftover.  
I've heard time spoils if you leave it out.  
How long did it take you to wrap this time up?  
Is the paper towel supposed to be moist?  
Should I put it in the freezer  
How long, do you think, will it keep?

Dear Sean,

Do I have to use all this spare time at once?  
Can I slice time and spread it  
over a burnt moment of the past or future?  
Can I go back and put a salty slab  
of time over a moment of harsh judgement?  
Can I skip forward to the future  
where I might need a few minutes to think it over?  
Can I use the time you've given me then instead of now?

## Seven-Year Itch

Every hotel room  
I wake up in is  
strange: all this air  
with its a damn-it-  
don't-you-walk  
-away-from-me  
dampness to it.  
The only thing I'm  
driving is myself  
crazy. Isn't it funny  
how if you don't  
scratch an itch,  
it stops asking to live  
and dies quietly?

In the corner of a fever  
dream I met a guy  
who ran a flea circus.  
There were bike-riding fleas  
and I know what  
you're thinking but no,  
the bikes didn't  
have training wheels.  
The fleas were so talented,  
they could keep  
their balance.  
He had trapeze artist fleas.  
He had fleas selling  
individual strings  
of pink cotton candy  
at the matchbox  
concession stand.

Everybody needs  
something to hold onto  
save the balcony's railing.  
Inside of our skin  
we're all flailing,  
reaching  
for something to keep us  
from drowning,  
to teach us how  
to counterbalance



the cloud of doubt hounding us  
with the value of now and thus

God knows  
this wind  
like a woman's fingers.  
Only now  
out on this balcony  
I've noticed  
how the sky  
is the color  
of a dried apricot.

## VITA

Jonathan Brown holds a BA in Communication from the College of Charleston, an MA in Writing and Consciousness from New College of California, and an MFA from the University of New Orleans. In 2013, he earned the John Woods Scholarship to study in Prague. His poems have been published in the *Worcester Review*, *Wordplaysound*, *The Nashville Review*, and *Indiefeed: Performance Poetry*.